

MALLORY VAYLE AND THE CURSE OF MAGGOTY SKULL

MARTIN HOWARD

Illustrated by

PETE WILLIAMSON

nosy crow

First published in the UK in 2024 by Nosy Crow Ltd
Wheat Wharf, 27a Shad Thames,
London, SE1 2XZ, UK

Nosy Crow Eireann Ltd
44 Orchard Grove, Kenmare,
Co Kerry, V93 FY22, Ireland

Nosy Crow and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Nosy Crow Ltd.

Text copyright © Martin Howard, 2024
Cover artwork by Ray Tierney, 2024
Inside illustrations copyright © Pete Williamson, 2024

The right of Martin Howard and Pete Williamson to be identified as the author and illustrator respectively of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved

ISBN: 978 1 80513 225 7

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of Nosy Crow Ltd.

The publisher and copyright holders prohibit the use of either text or illustrations to develop any generative machine learning artificial intelligence (AI) models or related technologies.

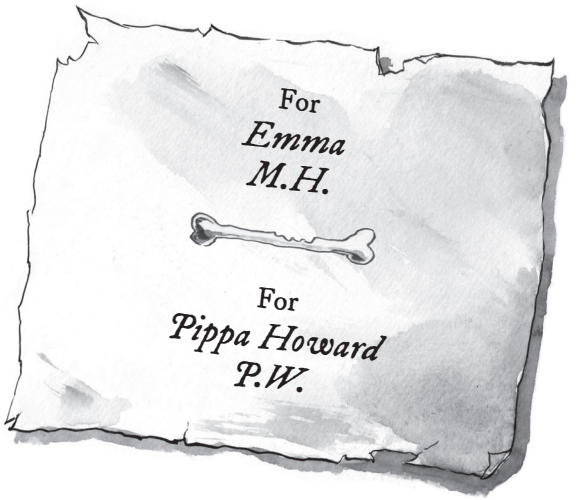
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A. following rigorous ethical sourcing standards.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018072
www.fsc.org

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.nosycrow.com











CHAPTER 1

The brass handles and cherry-coloured wood of two coffins had been the only splashes of colour in the graveyard. As they sank into the earth, Mallory Vayle's world turned grey. Raindrops drummed on the umbrella above her head, the sound almost drowning out the young priest's voice.

"Ashes to … erm … ashes, is it?" he squeaked. "Yes, ashes. Dust to … ahh … what was it now? Mustard? No, dust. Dust. Of course. Sorry."

"Rubbish," snorted a woman's voice beside Mallory. "He's useless."

Mallory guessed it was the priest's first funeral. He kept forgetting the words. She didn't much care. To her, they

had less meaning than the wind blowing a dark lock of hair that had escaped her tight bun. She tucked it behind an ear. Ignoring the stuttering priest, she said a last – silent – goodbye to the bodies of her mother and father. It could have been worse, she told herself. Watching her parents being buried wasn't exactly putting the 'fun' in 'funeral', but it could have been worse.

"Are you all right, Mallory?" said the woman's voice at her side.

Mallory gave a small nod without looking round.

"Soon be over," said a deeper voice on her other side.

"I'm fine," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"That's my brave girl."

Yes, Mallory told herself. It could have been much, much worse. At least she had her parents to help her through this difficult time. Even if the ghosts of Sally and Lionel Vayle did insist on chattering through their own funeral as if they were at an afternoon tea party.

"Nice to see so many people turned up," said the wispy, see-through spectre of her father. He grinned around at the sea of black coats and umbrellas. "I mean, that's a worry, isn't it? What if no one comes to your funeral?"

"In this weather too," nodded Mallory's almost transparent mother. "Poor things look drenched. That's one good thing about being dead, isn't it? The rain just goes straight through."





"I wish I'd died wearing slippers, though." Lionel Vayle looked down at the ghostly shoes he'd been wearing when the carriage he and his wife had been travelling in had taken an unexpected detour off Gibbett Bridge and into the river below. "These still pinch," he continued. "Which is odd, if you think about it. I mean, what exactly are they pinching if my toes are in that box down there? And why do I even have them on? Why are we dressed at all? Did our clothes die too?"

"I think we can all be very happy you still have clothes on, Lionel," his wife replied. "Oh, look, there's Sheila and Teddy Willetts at the back over there. We haven't seen them in ages."

"I mean to say, do I have to wear this suit for the rest of my … umm … I suppose I can't say 'life', can I?" mumbled her husband, digging a ghostly finger into his collar and tugging to loosen it.

His wife was too busy hopping up and down to answer. "Yoo hoo. Yoo hoo. Sheila," she shouted, waving.

"She can't see you," Mallory whispered. "No one can see you except me."

"Oh, yes," sighed Sally Vayle, dropping her hand. "Being dead is going to take some getting used to, I suppose."





Mallory sighed too, lifting her eyes from the twin, coffin-shaped holes. The graveyard was packed with crooked gravestones, covered with ivy and scattered between trees that were grimly hanging on to their last leaves. The tombs had been hemmed in by a wall of stone. Over it, the windows of steep-roofed houses stared into the graveyard.

The priest stuttered on, robes lashing in the wind.

"He really is terrible," said her mother.

"The whole experience is disappointing," Lionel Vayle agreed. "What you want at a funeral is drama. Wailing and gnashing of teeth. People sobbing into hankies and tearing at their clothes. Weeping mourners throwing themselves on to the coffins. I'd give the whole thing three out of ten."

"Da, are you giving your own funeral a review?" Mallory whispered.

Her father's train of thought wasn't going to be derailed. "What you want," he continued, "is people crumpling to their knees under the weight of their grief and mysterious strangers turning up … like that one. Oh. Who's she?"

Mallory's gaze followed her father's ghostly pointing finger to see a stranger walking through rows of





gravestones. She stopped a little way apart from the crowd. A few people turned to look. The woman was odd: tall, and strangely dressed beneath a bent umbrella. She wore a black turban with a stuffed crow attached to the front. Most of her face was hidden behind a large pair of spectacles like none Mallory had ever seen before. The glass lenses were black. The rest of the stranger was also hidden beneath a black fur coat. "I've no idea," Mallory said, answering her father's

question from the corner of her mouth.

"Ooh, this is more like it," he chirped. "A mysterious stranger turning up just when you need one, eh? Dark, forgotten secrets coming back to haunt us even as our bodies are lowered into the earth. *Classic* funeral."

The ghost of Sally Vayle peered at the woman. Her jaw fell open. "No," she gasped. "No … it can't be…"

Mallory's father interrupted. "They've started shovelling earth over us, Sally. Should we pay our last respects to ourselves?"

"Seems a bit pointless, Da," Mallory whispered. Even so, she fell silent, bowing her head while mud splattered on to the lids of her parents' coffins and her world turned cold and grim. Her ghostly parents could no longer do important parenting things, like earning money and putting food on the table. The Browns down the street had taken care of her after the accident, but they had six children of their own and no space for another. She was headed into the city orphanage and the loveless care of its grim matron.

Tears welled in her eyes.

Stop it, she scolded herself. Her parents were dead. Nothing she could do would change that. But at least she

still had her parents. She would always have her parents now. They would never change, never grow old.

And never, ever again would she feel their arms around her.

As the priest stammered through his last words, umbrellas started drifting away from the crowd. Funeral over, Mallory looked up to see people walking towards her. First to grip her hand was a plump man with greasy hair beneath a bowler hat.

"I'm so sorry for your loss … erm … Molly, isn't it?" he said. "If there's anything we at the bank can do…"

"Eh?" said Mallory, snapping out of her thoughts.

"Mr Whuppley, my old boss," her dad whispered in her ear. "Tell him he's an ugly, short-tempered git, would you, Mall? The best thing – the very best thing – about being dead is not having to see his greasy face every day. Tell him everyone at the bank knows about his bum problem too. We've all seen him scratching."

"Bum problem?" said Mallory without thinking. "Scratching?"

Mr Whuppley's face turned white. "Wha … *what*? Who's got a bum problem? I don't have a bum problem," he gurgled.

"Sorry. I meant to say, that's kind of you, Mr Whuppley," Mallory said hurriedly while her dad had hysterics next to her.

"Shush, Lionel," said Mallory's ma absently. She was still staring at the woman in the turban. "Oh, cripes," she muttered. "I think it is her."

Taking no notice of her parents, Mallory shook hand after hand until the graveyard was empty.

Almost empty.

Mallory blinked. Not all the mourners had left. The woman in the turban and strange spectacles was walking towards her, a hand outstretched.

"Mallory," said her mother. "This is—"

"You must be Mallory, darling girl," interrupted the woman in a loud voice, clasping Mallory's hand, then dropping it. Tossing aside her umbrella, she dragged Mallory into the depths of her coat instead. "What am I *thinking*?" she cried. "Shaking hands won't do at all. I simply must have you in my arms this instant. It's an instinct, isn't it? Even the mother earwig clasps her young to her earwiggy bosom."

Her own umbrella knocked aside, Mallory screwed her face up as cold rain trickled down the back of her dress.




"Mmmf-mmmf," she squawked from deep within the fur.

"*Enough*," bellowed the woman, pushing Mallory away and holding her at arm's length. Fingers like talons gripped her shoulders. "Let me look at you. Let me see that face. That face so ruined by grief; so horribly, horribly wrecked by sorrow."

Deciding to let that pass, Mallory wiped rain from her eyes. Steadying her umbrella in a sudden gust of wind, she said, "Umm … who are you, exactly?"

"She is—" Sally Vayle began.

The strange woman interrupted again. "But you mustn't weep, my sweet, sweet girl." Releasing one of Mallory's shoulders, she pulled dark glasses halfway down her nose. Violet eyes peered over the rims into Mallory's, as she continued. "For what is death but the blowing out of a candle? A candle no longer needed because dawn has arrived?"

"Who's Dawn?"

"Exactly, my darling. Exactly. Whose dawn indeed? How right you are." The woman leaned closer. The stuffed crow on her turban pecked Mallory's forehead. "Tell me, child, do you have it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Do I have what?" Mallory asked, baffled. "A sudden urge to run away, screaming?"



"Do you have the family gift?" the woman hissed, gripping tighter. "The family *curse*. The talent to part the curtains of death itself and speak with those who have passed over."

Mallory opened her mouth, but the woman was still jabbering. One hand reaching dramatically to her forehead, she cried, "No, wait. Don't tell me. Even now my spirit guide, Mr Lozenge, whispers to me from the beyond. He tells me—"

It was Mallory's turn to interrupt. One word stood out from the woman's babble, and was honking at the front of her brain. "Family?" she said, blinking.

"As I was saying," said the ghost of Sally Vayle, sounding annoyed. "She is—"

"Family," repeated the woman. "Dear girl, I am your Aunt Lilith."

"—your Aunt Hilda," finished Mallory's mother. "My sister. My long *lost* sister."

